

Human Perversion and Environmental Space: An Ecocritical reading of Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*

Munazza Yaqoob

Abstract

*This paper presents an ecocritical reading of Mohsin Hamid's novel *Moth Smoke* and examines the pernicious influence of pollution on human psyche. It attempts to explain that poisonous unhealthy environment blots human reasoning and corrupts human emotions. The novel is set in Lahore – a city which is polluted by vehicle and air conditioning exhaust, heat, dust, and smoke. Studies show that the inhabitants of this city inhale air containing an average of suspended particulate matters which is 6.4 times higher than World Health Organization guidelines. The novel sets a parallel between the polluted environment and polluted human psyches. Elite or working class, police or Government officials, drivers or bankers, old or young, men or women, all inhale polluted hot air, vehicle emissions, and smoke and exhale their polluted psyches in their social roles and responsibilities. The references to dead grass in Darashikoh's lawn which does not come to life even by torrents of monsoon, the grimy sky which hides the light of the stars, the smoke and stench of burning rubbish which clings to Darashikoh's body and mind contribute to our understanding of the interaction between the polluted environment and polluted society. We are made to realize that the cause of Darashikoh's fall is not the morally corrupt and economically unbalanced society. In reality as the hovering images of heat dust, smoke and stench suggest it is the devastating effect of polluted environment.*

This Marxian ecocritical interpretation of *Moth Smoke* is based on “the realization that individuals and social pathologies are coextensive” (Buell 2000:289). The novel with a deep ecological concern shows a reaction to the environmental pollution and “spiritual deficiencies of urban space” (Rozelle 2002:101). Regarding human life inseparable from the environment, the novel supports Buell’s opinion that physical environment influences human imagination and cognition (1986:283). It considers human society and nature as interconnected and interdependent and discusses how human identities are shaped by the biosphere they live in. The author through the portrayal of a socially, emotionally, and psychologically sick people living in a sick environment has skillfully made the external internal and internal external.

Lahore, where the story is set, seems a symbol of apocalypse where life is fluttering in the cage of spiritual and emotional as well as social death. It is a place where people lack the glory and sublimity of human imagination and soul. They are isolated whether they are in large social gatherings, air-conditioned rooms or airless dark rooms. A silence occupies their souls even when they are busy in social interaction or expressing love or making business deals. They are cold from inside whether they are making love, communicating with friends or socializing. Being alone, silent and cold signifies spiritual death. They are like decaying corpses and stench clings with them. Daru, the protagonist admits, “the smell stays with me....It clings even after I shower. Even after I dump my clothes in a tub of soapy water. It clings to me” (Hamid 2000:216). They desperately attempt to stave off their spiritual and emotional death and regenerate their human selves through drugs, sex, and other material luxuries but to no avail. It is a

story of people who are like the wastelanders in Eliot's *The Waste Land*. They are struggling to enjoy the bliss of love and to attain contentment in family life but fall prey to sex which ends merely in exhaustion, sickness and discontentment.

The environment related studies on Lahore, as for example an ambient air quality study carried out by Pakistan Environmental Agency and Japan International Cooperation Agency, show that the average suspended particulate matter in Pakistan's big cities like Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Islamabad is 6.4 times higher than World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines and average vehicle emission is 15-20 times more than the average vehicle emission in developed country (Abedullah 2006:3135). As a result of air pollution about 1,250 people die each year in Lahore and a large number are suffering from serious health hazards especially diseases related to eyes, respiratory system, heart, skin, and brain (Ali 2006). We do not find any reference in the novel that any group of people whether rich or poor is concerned with the decay of nature around them or the ecosystem they are living in. There is no reference to any establishment to investigate environment related issues. There is no attempt on the part of people or government to create awareness about the damage people are causing to environment and are becoming the victims of this damaged ecosystem. The attitude of the people depicted in the novel is supported by Abedullah who reports that "a number of environment related laws.... Through Pakistan Environment Protection ordinance 1983 exist. However, these laws are not implemented fully and effectively (2006:3137).

As the narrative moves on the readers can not escape the hovering images of dust, smoke, stench and heat. The atmosphere

remains grim through out whether the scenes are set in lawn parties, air-conditioned rooms, workshops or streets. We are informed by Hamid (2000) in the novel that people are being baked in heat (11), sweat and heat are “radiating out” of their bodies (85), they are “damp and smelly” (40), and their faces are floating in the “great womb of drug” (217). We are also told that “there are no stars because of the dust” (16). Everything is “dulled by a layer of dust” (95), and “the sun is completely blotted out by a dirty sky” (99). Our attention is also drawn to “mounds of rubbish in front of the neighbors’ houses smolder, trash smoke rising only to be beaten down by the rain” (216). Due to absence of a proper sewerage system “dirty water stretches across the road.” (230), and there is “smoky breeze that stinks of burning flesh from the trash pile down the street.” (231). Daru, the protagonist of the novel also tells us that when it rains he can “smell the dead grass that lies under the dirt of the lawn” (205) and that the rain does not regenerate nature and people rather brings flooding which brings “a crime wave to Lahore” (206). The city of Lahore, he tells us, is a “soggy city” (206). Recurring images of dust, smoke and heat and lack of brightness and freshness present the readers a world which is stale and tired where all human affairs and actions seem an endless pettiness.

The novel presents a society where a division has occurred between man and environment. It is a society where according to Wolanski the dynamic balance between culture and nature that determines physical and psychological health, has been disturbed (1999:79). Hence people are neither physically sound nor psychologically and spiritually happy. They lack a sound political and social consciousness, are culturally sick and economically deficient.

They are unhealthy and it makes them unhappy as well because “being happy means being physically sound, mentally intact, spiritually happy, socially active, politically aware, economically productive and culturally responsible” (Honari, 1999:19). Daru has been portrayed as a smart young man who degenerates into a drug addict. His sunken cheeks and lean body speak of his bad health. Murad a graduate with a master’s degree in English literature is what Null and Alfred term as “scatological” with a stinking sweating lumpy body with layers of fat on it (2003:1). The bureaucracy represented by Ozi’s father and Ozi and the middle classes represented by Daru and Murad are not contributing to the economy. They are culturally sick and are making their own wealth by robbing other people and their own country.

The novel advocating the necessity to acknowledge the significance of a healthy ecosystem for a healthy individual and social life draws our attention to the factors responsible for this deadly division between man and environment. The author seems to criticize the brutality of the capitalist system. In this system as the novel shows us, “whatever a man gains, he gains at the expense of some other man’s loss” (Morris 2000:32). The novel challenges the logic of capital economy and industry which insists that nothing matters beyond money, capital, and commodities. It supports Lenin’s opinion as cited by Eyerman that the capitalist system producing “a short range and pragmatic view” in people pushes them to a strain of labour for getting more and more (1981:45). Lahore in the novel represents Pakistan, which in the author’s view is a disillusioned capitalist society. In this capitalist society the author shows us the irrational categorization of humans into classes based on wealth. Those who are born rich enjoy all the material comforts and social respect and have

an enormous power of purchase. Their pride and power lead them to the actions which are destructive but are duly justified or concealed by the system they are operating within. Their destructive actions include money laundering, murdering, drug addiction, alcohol addiction, adultery, exploitation of lower classes etc. Those who are placed in the lower order in this economical hierarchy are relegated to sub human status. Being deprived of the privileges the rich enjoy, the comforts and luxuries and power of purchase, they look at the rich with envy and revenge. Their envy, desire for wealth, and revenge also lead them to destructive actions such as murder, drug addiction, drug dealing, adultery, robbery, etc., but unlike the rich they are punished by the law and society for their crimes. The tragic end of Darashikoh draws our attention to this dark aspect of the society depicted in the novel.

People in Lahore do not live their life in alliance with nature. Rather they live as commodities in industrial capital society. This irrational establishment of identities engages people in a blind struggle to accumulate wealth, capital, material luxuries forgetting that they are humans blessed with a soul and a human heart. Spiritual satisfaction, emotional purification and intellectual sophistication are irrelevant issues and alien phenomenon to people living as commodities. Accumulation of wealth for acquiring power of purchase becomes the logic for living a good life for the people whose identities are associated with capital rather than with human values. One of the significant examples in this regard is the character of Ozi. He is the only son of a corrupt bureaucrat and represents the extravagance of the consumer culture. For Hamid (2000) he “more than most men, sought to master his environment” (105). He loves air-conditioners with “a passion unrivaled by his love for any other species of inanimate

object” (105) and the novel subtly suggests that he loves it more than humans as he prefers to have air-conditioning to being with his wife in his room. Air-conditioner in the novel becomes a symbol of material luxuries, enormous power of purchase, and industrial commodities which is the birth right of those who are born in rich families. He has all that a capitalist society considers necessary to make life happy and healthy: big cars, grand mansion, good education, elitist parties, a beautiful life and a son. The novel also tells us about Ozi that loves driving fast which leads to the accident in which he hits a boy and kills him but does not feel any remorse. He is not comfortable in his family life so tries to seek satisfaction in extravagant parties. These details help the readers to probe in the deep recesses of his psyche to discover that it is chaotic and disordered. All these speak of a man who is spiritually hollow and psychologically dissatisfied. He appears to be a man with distorted cognition and psyche and is desperately trying to seek health and happiness in wealth and material luxuries. Ozi's life style represents Lahore's elite culture which has ignored the balance between culture and environment. The novelist thus helps the reader to see how when a culture disregards nature it becomes the cause of the decay not only of the ecosystem but the whole society as well.

Man in the novel is shown as an active agent and responsible for environmental pollution and also a victim of it. Rich and poor, both being spiritually barren and emotionally rotten are like “shadows” and “like stain dissolve into grayness” (5). They are suffering from distorted cognition and sick psyches. They are subjects constructed through a process of conditioning by the capitalist ideology (Althusser: 1971). For Hawkes “This process of conditioning is manipulation of the soul”, which, “is just as necessary for the functioning of today's

economy as the disciplining and regimentation of the body was to the capitalism of the industrial epoch” (2003:164). The people of Lahore are presented as conditioned subjects who have lost their “rational autonomy”, i.e., in the words of Warren, “the ability to reflect on and direct [their] desire in a way that [they] can develop life plan” (1990:615). They believe that immediate satisfaction of their desires for material comforts and commodities is what a man needs in life and should work for it. This distorted cognitive functioning serves as motivation for all of their actions which disregard human values. People, being under this false consciousness, view all their actions and the actions of others which are of the interests of capitalists as normal. They support individualism, are engaged in commodity worship, and do not value social totality (Eyerman 1981:50). The market for them becomes the law to regulate social and individual life. Individuals in such a system turn a deaf ear to the voice which invites them attempts to break their false conscious and help them see the brutal reality of the system. One of Daru’s old school fellow who is fighting against those who have “control over [their] destinies” (Hamid 2000: 225) tells him that they “need a systemwhere man can rely on the law for justice, where he is given basic dignity as a human being and opportunity to prosper regardless of his status at birth.” (225). He invites Daru to join their movement for socioeconomic reformation, but Daru rejects the invitation and in the end we see that he becomes the victim of the corrupt system.

The world portrayed in the novel is a complex world of geopolitical, socioeconomics, and ecosocial issues. Informing the readers that the people of Lahore are “at the mercy of the powerful” (225), Hamid builds up a significant link between atomic

bomb testing and the economic and environmental crisis of the country. References to unusual heat wave which is causing death and disease and to wretched economic conditions of the people are placed parallel to the references to the celebrations on the successful testing of the bomb. This helps the author to facilitate the readers to understand his critical views on the ideological conditioning of people in a capitalist society.

Inhabitants of Lahore as discussed are portrayed as subjects conditioned by capitalistic hegemonic powers, so they live with false conscious, are suffering from distorted cognition, and have lost their 'rational autonomy'. These are the power structures of the society, Hamid attempts to show, which influence people's attitude towards the environment (Bukeavich 2002:54). Hence it is not strange if they show a total disregard for biosphere and the living world of nature around them. It is also not strange if they are totally ignorant of the damage being done to them – to their body, soul, and psyche by their polluted environment. They are sick in heart, in personal life, in family life and in their social life. Mumtaz, though married, seeks satisfaction in having sexual relations with her husband's best friend. Ozi finds satisfaction in sleeping naked in an extremely warm bedroom in winter and sleeping with a blanket in an extremely cold bedroom in summer and even prefers air- conditioning to being with his wife. Daru idles away his days in taking drugs and killing moths and enjoying sex with his best friend's wife, and Murad seeks happiness in intimidating people, robbing them, cheating them, and selling drugs. Police, bureaucracy, and bankers all are shown corrupt.

The novel makes it clear that a social system which is erected on the power of capital and luxury industry breeds consumer culture

marked by snobbery, pride, and artificiality, has no concern for nature and for environment. Such a system taking man as separate from the nature becomes one of the major cause of environmental abuse (Luke, 1997:5). The references to the smoky breeze, dull sky, and rotten food and fruit emphasize disharmony which has occurred between man and nature. The author seems to take gardening as a “careful management of nature” (Kehler 2007:617). He refers to Daru’s neglected lawn with dried grass coated with dust in order to present the sorry picture of the relationship between man and nature. The novel shows us that the polluted environment has affected human mind, body and psyche. The disharmony which has occurred between man and nature, the novel explains, is not only causing damage to nature but man’s health and happiness.

The author thinks that the people of Lahore are living in polluted environment and are “committing slow suicide” (Luke 1997:9). The description of polluted places, rotten food, and dirty smelly human bodies all speak of rotten space. The protagonist Daru keeps sweating, his home is filthy, stinking, smoky and dark, his garden is dead and dry, his room is airless and dark, the food in his house is “consumed by colored molds that spread like cancer” (211), the rotten fruit oozes out of “ruptures in sickly skin” (211). The author has thus meaningfully set Daru’s physical sickness, emotional morbidity and drug addiction, parallel to his sick body and filthy space he is living in.

The novel gives us an understanding that environmental space and the humans who live in it are inseparable (Bates 2000:257). People in the novel are shown as agents as well as victim of the rotten socioeconomic and ecological system. The novel helps us to

understand society through nature and nature through society. It is a morality tale which gives a lesson that a happy healthy society “emerges from the kindred relationship of humanity with natural world” and the space, which man perverts, in turn damages his physical health and perverts his psyche (Mayers 2003:18).

References

Abedullah. (2006). Sources and consequences of environmental pollution and institution's role, in Pakistan. *Journal of Applied Sciences* 6 (15), 3134-3139.

Ali, N. (2006, 26 January). Commuter transport poisoning Lahore. *Daily Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.dailytimes.com.pk>

Althusser, L. (1971). *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*. (B. Brewster, Trans.). London: New Left Books. (Original work published 1969).

Bates, J. (2000). The Ode 'to Autumn' as Ecosystem. In L. Coupe (Ed.), *Green studies reader: From romanticism to ecocriticism* (256-261). Florence, USA: Routledge.

Buell, L. (1986). *New England literary culture: from revolution through Renaissance*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P.

Buell, L. (2000). Leslie Silko: Environmental apocalypticism. In L. Coupe (Ed.), *Green studies reader: From romanticism to ecocriticism* (288-292). Florence, USA: Routledge.

Bukeavich, N. (2002). Are We Adopting the Right Measures to cope? Ecocrisis in John Brunner's "Sand on Zanzibar". *Science Fiction Studies*, 29 (1), 53-70. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/>

Eyerman, R. (1981). False consciousness and ideology in Marxist theory. *Acta Sociologica: Work and Ideology*, 24(2), 43-50. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/>

Hawkes, D. (2003). *Ideology*. In *The New Critical Idiom Series*. London: Routledge.

Honari, M. (1999). Health. In M.Honari & T. Boleyn (Eds.) *Health ecology: Health, culture, and human- environment interaction*(19-21).KY, USA: Routledge.

Kehler, G. (2007). Gertrude, Jekyll and the late Victorian garden book: Representing nature-culture relation, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 35, 617-633.

Luke, W. T. (1997). *Ecocritique: Contesting the politics of nature, economy, and culture*. Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota .

Mayers, J. (2003). Other nature: Resistance to ecological hegemony in Charles W. Chesnutt's "The Conjured Woman", *African American Review* 37(1), 5-20.

Morris, W. (2000). Art, socialism and environment. In L. Coupe (Ed.), *Green studies reader: From romanticism to ecocriticism* (32-36). Flance, USA: Routledge.

Null, L., & Alfred, S. (2003). Sex, drugs, and deception [Review of the book *Moth Smoke*]. *The English Journal*, 93(2), 88-90. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/>

Rozelle, L. (2002). Ecocritical city: modernist reaction to urban environments in "Miss. Lonelyhearts" and "Paterson". *Twentieth Century Literature*, 48 (1), 100-115. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/>

Warren, M. (1990). Ideology and the Self. *Theory and Society*, 19(5), 599-634. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/>

Wolanski, N. (1999). Human health as an ecological problem. In M. Honari & T. Boleyn (Eds.) *Health ecology: Health, culture, and human-environment interaction* (79-81). KY, USA: Routledge.

All textual references have been taken from

Hamid, M. (2000). *Moth Smoke*. London: Granta Books.